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Reagan said soft on nuclear terrorism

By Tom Diaz
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The chairman of the House Democratic Caucus ripped into President Reagan yesterday for being "soft on defense against nuclear terrorism," and having a "cavalier attitude" toward the spread of nuclear weapons.

"This president and his administration seem bent on undoing the past bipartisan effort to stop nuclear proliferation," Rep. Richard A. Gephardt, D-Mo., told a conference on nuclear terrorism in a luncheon speech.

The administration has "abdicated all leadership in trying to halt the growing commercial use of separated plutonium worldwide," he said.

Separated plutonium, sometimes called "bomb-grade" plutonium, is nuclear explosive material which can be chemically refined from the waste products of nuclear power plant operation.

Rep. Gephardt leveled his charge on the first day of a two-day conference — convened by the Nuclear Control Institute and the State University of New York's Institute for Studies in International Terrorism — aimed at finding ways to head off the possibility of a terrorist incident involving nuclear material.

"The public and policy-makers need to be not unduly alarmed, but

duly alarmed," said Paul Leventhal, president of the Nuclear Control Institute.

According to one participant at the closed-door conference, more than 100 threats to use nuclear weapons against targets in the United States have turned out to be hoaxes. But experts disagreed on how likely it is that such nuclear violence will become real.

Dr. Bertram Brown, president of Hahnemann University in Philadelphia, told a press conference that he has "reluctantly concluded that we will see a major nuclear incident before the end of this decade."

But Brian M. Jenkins of the Rand Corporation said in a paper delivered yesterday that "going nuclear

... represents a quantum jump for terrorists, and one that is not impossible but by no means imminent or inevitable."

Another expert said it is difficult to assess the risk, since the barn door is already open.

"In attempting to gauge its likelihood, we must first acknowledge that we don't know how much, if any, [nuclear explosive material] may already have been stolen," retired

Rear Adm. Thomas Davies said in a paper delivered yesterday.

Participants focused on two kinds of possible nuclear terrorism — clandestine manufacture or theft of a nuclear weapon and sabotage of existing facilities, such as power plants.

There seemed to be general agreement that manufacture of a weapon presents the more difficult threat to control and the greatest possible damage.

Some noted that the technical difficulty of making a bomb lowers — for the time being at least — the risk.

"Nuclear weapons are not tinkertoys," Bernard O'Keefe, an executive whose company manufactures nuclear triggering devices, is expected to say in a paper scheduled for delivery today. "Their design and fabrication or theft require a degree of skill, determination and sense of purpose far removed from the concept of the ordinary wooden pistol wielding whacko."

Mr. O'Keefe's paper says more than 100 phone threats have been "dealt with crisply and expertly by existing government organizations," the "most visible" of which is the

United States Nuclear Emergency Search Team.

But other experts believe that authorities may be exaggerating the difficulty of making a bomb.

Theodore Taylor, president of Nova Corp. and a former nuclear weapons designer, told The Washington Times that, given access to bomb-grade material, at least some terrorist groups could make a nuclear bomb without the help of a nation that already is making nuclear weapons.

He told a breakfast briefing that the public would be "less reassured" about the terrorist threat if it knew certain classified information about the relative ease of making a nuclear weapon.

Whatever the possibility of putting together a nuclear bomb, several experts said in papers and private talks that control of plutonium is the key to preventing terrorists access to the raw material for making such devices.

Others said military authorities should review security procedures for nuclear weapons.

"In theory, nuclear weapons should be consistently secured by the highest quality systems and personnel," said Adm. Davies. "How well does military security protect against terrorism? The Beirut attacks confirm that it was not then designed with terrorism in mind."